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Four Days in Iran Jail Leaves Reporter Seib Baffled as to Reasons

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Was It Inside Power Struggle? Mistaken Ethnic Identity? Burger With Dill Pickles

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One day after my release from Iran, my wife, Barbara Rosewicz, and I climbed into a small private jet in Switzerland to fly home to the U.S. On board, the crew had provided a movie. Its title: "Spies Like Us."

It was an ironic end to my baffling week of detention in Iran, where I had gone to report for this newspaper. I was grabbed in the dark of night Jan. 31 by plainclothes policemen in Tehran, accused of spying for Israel and interrogated for four days. Then, as suddenly as I was taken, I was released.

The confusion over why I was arrested probably never will be cleared up. Perhaps I was a pawn in an internal power struggle. Perhaps it was a genuine mistake. Or perhaps Iran sought an opportunity to display publicly its distaste for Israel.

My detention and some of the diplomatic efforts to gain my release do provide some insights about Iran today. They suggest the difficulty of dealing with Iran in any fashion. Division so deep that one ministry can invite a reporter to visit and another can arrest him illustrates how risky is the Reagan administration's strategy of attempting to make deals with Iran. However, in the end, common sense seems to have prevailed, suggesting there are some Iranian leaders who can be influenced by reason. My release seems to have been secured by some combination of pressure from abroad and the willingness somewhere in Tehran to act responsibly.

During the detention, however, my mind wasn't on geopolitics but on my fate. So what follows is a personal account of what happened.

Thursday, Jan. 29

My problems began. I and most of 56 other journalists, invited by Iran to visit the Iran-Iraq war front, had visas that had expired. The reason: The government had invited us to stay longer to cover a press conference by Parliament Speaker Ali Akhbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who is emerging as Iran's most powerful politician. The visas had to be formally extended before we could leave the country, and, as instructed by officials in Iran's press office, we took our passports to an immigration police station for the formalities. Everyone's passport was returned a couple of hours later—except mine.

I instead got a call from a mysterious-sounding man named Jalala who said he was from the immigration office. There was, he said, a problem with my passport. According to him, my name was similar to that of someone listed by the immigration computer as a wanted man. He implied it wasn't a serious problem, but because the Islamic weekend already had begun, nothing could be done until offices reopened Saturday. Nevertheless, I already was concerned and had contacted my editors in New York and the Swiss embassy in Tehran.

Saturday

As requested, I returned to the immigration police station promptly at 10 a.m., accompanied by a Swiss diplomat who looks after American interests in Iran and by a low-ranking official from the Iranian press office. After bouncing from office to office seeking my passport, we ended up at the "Investigations Division," which is run by young, plainclothes officers of Iran's intelligence and internal-security organization. We waited for almost two hours for some word on my passport. Eventually, the officers strongly suggested that the Swiss diplomat and the Iranian press official leave and that I alone remain.

Instead, we all left hastily. The diplomat and I went to his house to make calls in a futile attempt to find out what was happening. Four hours later, Iranian officials reached in various offices all said they couldn't or wouldn't help. Three of my American colleagues, Roberto Suro of the New York Times, Loren Jenkins of the Washington Post and Charles Campbell of the Associated Press, had delayed their departures as long as possible to stay with me but now had to leave Iran.

Although the Swiss offered to house me overnight, I decided that remaining on diplomatic premises could suggest I was hiding in order to conceal something. That, I feared, would only heighten whatever suspicions were causing my problem. So I asked to be returned to my hotel.

On the way, a Swiss diplomat and I were followed by two cars. At the hotel my room key was mysteriously missing, so we decided to return to the Swiss residence. As we walked through the hotel parking lot about 7 p.m., four bearded young men, dressed in olive-green jackets, ran up and began yelling in English, "Police!" Two grabbed me, pinned my arms behind my back, and shoved me away from the diplomat and into the back seat of a car that had pulled up alongside. One jumped on top of me and told me to keep my eyes shut. Though I was handled roughly, I never saw a gun, at this or any other time.

For a few minutes, we drove wildly through the streets. Soon the car stopped, and I was pushed into the back seat of a second car. It drove on for a few more minutes, and when it stopped I was led blindfolded inside and up the stairs of a concrete building. I later learned I was in Evin prison, the facility in northern Tehran where the shah's secret police once tortured political prisoners.

Saturday Night to Tuesday

I was repeatedly interrogated in English by several different Iranian officials before finally being told, about 2:30 a.m. Sunday, to go to sleep. At first, my interrogators asserted that I wasn't an American citizen at all but an Israeli who was spying for the Mossad, the Israeli intelligence organization. As the hours and days rolled by, my interrogators began steadily scaling back their accusations: I was an American but was a resident of Israel; I was an American but had spent long periods of time in Israel; perhaps I wasn't spying for Israel on this trip, but hadn't I done so in the past?

At the outset, I had decided that the only sensible strategy was to answer all questions frankly and honestly. So I openly acknowledged regularly visiting Israel as a reporter, as have most other correspondents assigned to cover the entire Middle East. From my Cairo base, I also had traveled to the most radical Arab countries, including Libya and Syria, Iran's allies, as well as to Iraq, Iran's war opponent. But, from the beginning, the questioning focused almost exclusively on my travel to Israel.

And, as distasteful as it seems to Americans, my religious background was a central subject of questioning. Though I am a Roman Catholic of German descent, my interrogators assumed I was Jewish and further assumed that, as such, my first loyalty was to the Jewish state. There was a similar suspicion about my wife and her family, also Roman Catholics.

Whenever questioned, I was blindfolded. But I could remove the blindfold later, when I was left alone in the interrogation room, and was never handcuffed or physically harmed. I was fed amply three times a day. I had to wear the clothes I was arrested in for four days, yet was glad I wasn't forced to change into a prison uniform. Though my interrogators searched through my personal papers and belongings, everything was scrupulously returned, including my money and credit cards.

My questioners seemed to have little detailed information about my journalism career or my newspaper. At one point, they seemed surprised when I explained that the Journal is America's largest-circulation daily newspaper and that its publisher, Dow Jones & Co., is publicly owned.

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My worst night was one spent alone in a small, hot cell with no bed.

Otherwise, I was allowed to sleep in different interrogation rooms, sometimes on a floor and sometimes in a cot but always alone. During detention I never saw two other Americans that my captors mentioned are being held in the same prison—Jon Pattis and a second American whose family has asked that his name not be used. My repeated requests to see a Swiss diplomat or to telephone my wife weren't granted.

By Tuesday, though, my interrogation seemed to take a positive turn. My interrogators, failing to find the Bible I had requested, brought me a book—Paul Erdman's "The Crash of '79," a novel about how the shah's scheming ruins the world economy. They also delighted in presenting me with a hamburger—complete with dill pickles—for dinner.

Wednesday

I waited without word from my interrogators until 2 p.m. Then, quickly and without fanfare, I was turned over to the Swiss ambassador to Iran. I was released without being charged. Although an Iranian press report said I was expelled and permanently barred from Iran, I wasn't told that I was being expelled nor that I couldn't return. One of my interrogators took me to the prison gate, asked for my business card and said, "I hope to see you again in Iran—but not in jail." He turned my passport over to the Swiss ambassador. For the first time in a week, I got my hands on it.

I picked up my luggage at the hotel and paid my bill—including charges for the days I was in jail. I spent the next day and a half with the Swiss. I got my first reports from the outside and heard my brother, Paul, interviewed on the Voice of America from my hometown of Hays, Kan. I also heard for the first time that Iranian Prime Minister Hussein Musavi had said in an interview that I had asked unusual questions during our visit to the war front. In fact, my reporting wasn't any different from that of other correspondents, and my interrogators never quizzed me in any detail about it.

Thursday

Ironically, I had to begin my day as I had a week earlier—with a trip to the police station to get my visa extended. This time I got the necessary stamps without problem. From there it was on to a travel office to get my own ticket out of Tehran on the flight of my choice.

In the pre-dawn hours of Friday morning, I boarded an Iran Air plane for the southern Iranian city of Bandar Abbas. There was one final moment of tension at Bandar Abbas: As we switched to a Swissair flight to Zurich, an Iranian policeman checking passports pulled me aside with a knowing grin. He made a big production of checking each page of my passport, then finally handed it back and waved me on board.

It is plausible to conclude that I was detained by a faction within Iran's internal-security and intelligence agencies that simply wanted to grab an American journalist to embarrass those who had invited us. My occasional reporting trips into Israel, along with my Mideastern-sounding name, dark complexion and beard, may have made me a good candidate.

It is widely accepted in Tehran that we journalists were invited in by a faction in the government led by Parliament Speaker Rafsanjani, the leader most closely identified with secret arms dealings with the U.S. It is also widely accepted that Ayatollah Hussein Ali Montazeri, the designated successor to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini as Iran's spiritual leader, leads a rival faction that opposes the kind of opening to the West represented by arms deals with the U.S. and invitations to American and European reporters. The prime minister, Mr. Musavi, appears to be aligned with the hard-line faction, and various other ministries appear to have people in both camps.

The theory that I was a victim of factionalism is further strengthened by the fact that the visit of foreign journalists caused such a stir throughout Iran. The day after our televised press conference with Mr. Rafsanjani, Tehran's bazaar was buzzing with talk of the Western journalists who dared to ask probing questions of the powerful parliament speaker. Some clearly thought it scandalous that Mr. Rafsanjani deigned to speak to American journalists at all.

There is other evidence that Iran is especially divided over anything involving the U.S. One story going around in Tehran says that when former U.S. national security adviser Robert McFarlane visited Iran secretly last year and stayed at the former Hilton Hotel where I also was housed, there was a standoff in the hotel parking lot between armed guards protecting Mr. McFarlane and police dispatched by hardliners to arrest him.

The greater mystery is why, once I had been taken, I was freed. The course of my questioning and other evidence suggest that once the practical-minded factions in the Iranian government sensed the international outcry that would result from the seizure of an invited journalist—especially an established Middle East correspondent for a major newspaper—they made it clear to my captors that without a good case they should quickly drop the investigation. Thus, international protests, combined with serious "back-channel" efforts to verify to Iran that I was a legitimate journalist and not a spy, may well have won my release.

In retrospect, the depth of anti-Israeli feeling I experienced during detention raises questions whether Israeli officials who think that they can work covertly with Iranian officials really understand what they are up against. There isn't any reason to doubt the passion of Iranian soldiers who shout that, after toppling the Iraqi government, they intend to "liberate" Jerusalem from Israeli control. And that, in turn, raises more questions about the Reagan administration's strategy of trying to make contacts inside Iran by working through Israeli intermediaries.

As a reporter, I can only hope that my whole ordeal doesn't interfere with the continued movement of international journalists into and out of Iran. The importance of a free flow of information, both for Iran and the rest of the world, isn't diminished by one nasty incident. And one can only pray that the handful of Westerners still held on espionage charges in Iran can soon share my good fortune.